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ABSTRACT

Background reading materials are provided in this booklet developed to be used in conjunction with the award winning color documentary film "With Babies and Banners." The film records the role that the women of Flint, Michigan, played in the great General Motors sit-down strike of 1937. The readings are suitable for college audiences and for secondary-level students who want a more in-depth historical treatment of how women built the labor movement in the United States. The booklet is well illustrated with black and white photographs. The introductory chapter introduces and describes the 16mm documentary. Chapters 2-4 discuss the historical background of the sit-down, examining how the working women and the wives, mothers, sisters, and sweethearts of the striking auto workers, joined together as the Women's Emergency Brigade and became the spearhead of the 44-day-long battle in which the strikers emerged triumphant, catapulting the new United Auto Workers to national prominence. The concluding chapter examines conditions facing women working today. (RM)

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With Babies and Banners

ILLUSTRATED
HISTORICAL
BOOKLET

SO 014530

OUR DADS WILL WIN!
MY DADDY STRIKES FOR US LITTLE TYKES
ON TO VICTORY
OUR DADS WILL WIN!
MY DADD IS A UNION MAN
OUR DADS WILL WIN!
WE'RE BEHIND OUR DADS 100%
ON TO VICTORY

This book was produced by
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With Babies and Banners

ILLUSTRATED HISTORICAL BOOKLET

1982

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CHAPTER I

Our Lost Roots
An Introduction

"We are the foremothers of today's young women. And we are proud of it."

Before 1937, trade unions had won only a fraction of the American workforce to their cause, and had altogether failed to organize the major mass-production industries, like steel, rubber, and auto. Workers who voiced any sympathy with trade unionism were fired from their jobs and blacklisted from future employment. Striking workers fared even worse—with the courts, police, and National Guard arrayed against them, few could withstand the beatings, tear-gassings, and mass arrests that ended most strikes in the 1920s and early 1930s.

In the winter of 1937 one group of working people dramatically changed this status quo when they successfully occupied and held the key factories of the giant General Motors Corporation in Flint, Michigan, for 44 days.

The victory of the Flint sitdowners marked the beginning of the end of this era of repression. Hundreds of thousands of workers across the country, following the lead of Flint's pioneers, sat down in their workplaces and demanded their legal right to union representation. In the four years immediately following the strike, over five million workers joined unions and, through collective bargaining, won contracts from their employers.

Conditions changed dramatically in America's major industries. Not only were such benefits as pensions and health insurance won. Basic everyday job conditions were changed as well. Where before, companies could arbitrarily speed up production and slash wages, many were now compelled to bargain with elected union representatives over production standards and pay. Through collective bargaining agreements many companies were now compelled to honor seniority (length of service) as the chief criteria for job security and promotion, rather than tending to fire and lay off whomever they chose, favoring the few and intimidating the many. Where before, management had subordinated working conditions to profits, some were now compelled to negotiate with representing trade unions over safety equipment or improved working conditions at their plants.

The men who occupied the plants are, for good reason, remembered as working-class heroes; yet the women who organized in the communities surrounding the plants, who fed the strikers, and who even defended the strikes against police attack, are little more than footnotes in most histories of the General Motors sitdown, and other similar events.

The film, *With Babies and Banners: Story of the Women's Emergency Brigade*, celebrates this watershed event by revealing the story of the women behind the successful strike against General Motors (GM) in Flint.

Oral history is a technique that filmmakers and others use to document events and experiences. It is, in many cases, the only way to preserve the history of ordinary working people and women who haven't had access to the big publishing houses, research institutions, and universities that produce our history books. The oral historian records people's own accounts of their experiences and checks them against many other information sources to verify their accuracy and scope.

Though women and men alike have built our society, the lowest paid (and unpaid) work has generally been assigned to women: as mothers, office workers, waitresses, farm workers, household employees, garment stitchers, and factory workers. Their labor helped build our country; their struggles have helped launch every movement for social change in modern American history—everything from trade unionism, and the civil rights movement, to the women's movement and peace movements today. Yet few women are featured, either in school textbooks that cover this period, or in television or motion picture accounts that recall it. The documentary film, *With Babies and Banners*, begins to fill this factual gap.

Minimizing or ignoring the role of working women does more than deny an important part of the past; it also limits the future by perpetuating myths and stereotypes about women and working people as a whole. Re-

claiming the past through the recording and documenting of oral histories helps young and old people alike. The everyday life hopes and occurences of ordinary people are left out of most traditional accounts. When these oral histories are shared and told, they can open up new ways for people to learn from experience and act upon it.

People discovering their roots may no longer see the world and its conditions as a "given" handed to them, but can begin to see history as something that people like themselves can make, affect and change.

The story of *With Babies and Banners* is such an account. It's a story about change and how change occurs—of women breaking away from traditional roles and finding new strengths and capabilities as they organized on behalf of their families, their communities, and their jobs. *With Babies and Banners* also links the past with the present by highlighting some of the many changes women and all working people needed in the 1930s and still need today.

"Oh, there's a thousand names and a thousand faces, if only we could capture them."

With Babies and Banners documents a segment of our history through first-hand accounts of ordinary women now in their 60s and 70s. First the story was carefully researched through books, manuscripts, newspapers, newsletters, leaflets, union journals, letters, scrapbooks, newsreels, and photographs, of the time. In order to reconstruct women's participation in the Flint sitdown strike, the filmmakers first wrote a historical account documenting the women's role and exploring the many problems facing women in the labor force and labor movement in the 30s. They then interviewed the participants, the makers of history themselves. The nine women interviewed represent a cross-section of the many women active in the sitdown strikes in Flint and Detroit during the 1930s. Four were working outside the home when the Flint sitdown began: Nellie Besson-Hendrix, Laura Hayward, and Helen Hauer at AC Spark Plug, and Teeter Walker at Redmond's auto parts factory. Deliah Parrish and Babe Gelles were housewives when the strike began, but had previously worked in Michigan's auto plants: Deliah at Fisher Body, and Babe at Briggs in Detroit.

Genora, Nellie and Teeter were leaders in the Women's Emergency Brigade—Genora was Captain, and Nellie and Teeter were Lieutenants. Mary Handa, a Flint housewife, was one of the first women to join the Brigade. Helen and Laura became active in strike-support work, and were some of the many un-named women participating in the United Auto Workers' (U.A.W.'s) organizing drive at G.M.'s AC Spark Plug plant.

Babe and Lillian Hatcher both lived in Detroit at the time of the Flint sitdown. Babe became a co-founder of the Detroit Women's Emergency Brigade. She travelled to Flint during the strike, whenever support was needed. Lillian was involved in strike support and Auxiliary activities during the Chrysler sitdown in Detroit.

For all of the women, the Flint strike was a momentous occasion. They had acted out of support for their families and communities in a desperate situation, and found, through their persistence in continuing the work of the strike, that their organizing skills were strengthened and that they had experienced, many for the first time, the powerful role they could play, through the labor movement, in helping to improve their own and their families' lives.

Following the strike, their important contribution was honored by all concerned—and then regretably, forgotten. Over the next 40 years, most of the women remained silent, sometimes even minimizing, in their own recollections, their roles in the strike. However, in 1977, the Flint Regional U.A.W.'s 40th Anniversary celebration of the sitdown protested the lack of recognition given to these women labor pioneers.

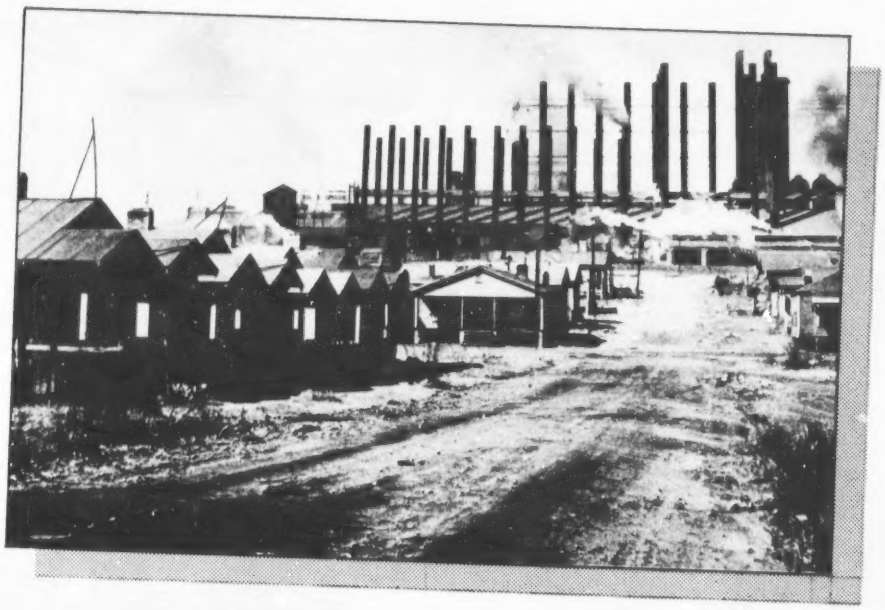
On the basis of their shared recollections, the story of the Women's Emergency Brigade can be told, a story which weaves their individual lives into the tapestry of our nation's history.

U.A.W.A.
WOMEN'S
AUXILIARY
DETROIT

CHAPTER 2

Sit down!

"They were the big wheel here; they had the judges behind them; they had the mayor behind them; and the little man had no chance."



In the spring of 1936, only the most dedicated trade unionists would have believed that General Motors—one of the most profitable corporations in American history, and vehemently anti-union—would be forced within a year to sign a contract with the newly formed United Auto Workers. And few would have guessed that General Motors would be forced to concede after a decisive defeat in the very heart of its empire—in Flint, Michigan.

After all, the U.A.W. had virtually no membership in Flint: only 150 paid-up members in June 1936, and a treasury totaling exactly $24.

General Motors, in contrast, seemed to own the entire city—lock, stock, and barrel. No town in America was so thoroughly wedded to the company, founded after the turn of the century by Flint's own William Crapo Durant. Durant bought out one company after another in the early years of the auto industry. Each time, he'd promptly move the bulk of their operations to his home town: first Buick, followed by AC Spark Plug, Chevrolet, and then Fisher Body. By 1936, these four GM divisions employed two of every three workers in Flint.

The city government was equally dependent on the company payroll. Three of Flint's nine city commissioners worked for GM. The mayor was a GM executive. The Chief of Police was a former GM detective. And the city manager owned the foundry that made castings for GM's Buick division.

In every respect, Flint was a classic "company town," much like many other American cities dominated by large coal companies, steel mills, or textile manufacturers. If, for example, one wanted to buy a new house in Flint, one went to GM's "Modern Housing Corporation." A mortgage would no doubt be financed (and during the depression, possibly foreclosed) by GM's "Savings and Investment Plan." As a GM employee, a person was expected to buy insurance from GM's "Industrial Mutual Association"—which also owned Flint's auditorium.

GM even "owned" its own "union," set up in 1933 to ward off early organizing efforts by the American Federation of Labor. Delegates to this company-run "Employee Association" met on company premises, at company expense. However, they could only discuss sanitation and housekeeping. Wages, hours, and production speeds were all forbidden topics.

The company's control also stretched far beyond Flint. After 1920, the powerful DuPont family had bought GM, and it took over first place in worldwide sales from the Ford Motor Company by the late 1920s. In 1936, the company's 70 U.S. factories accounted for 43% of all U.S. car sales. General Motors' profits in that depression year equaled a phenomenal 38¢ return on each dollar invested.

The small United Auto Workers appeared powerless by comparison. The union could not get a permit to pass out handbills in Flint. The city's only daily newspaper wouldn't sell the U.A.W. advertising space, and no radio would give it air time.

By the late winter of 1936, the U.A.W. had only managed to assemble a core of unionists in each of GM's Flint plants. The bulk of GM's workers, while resenting the company's oppressive working conditions, weren't yet convinced that the U.A.W. could help or protect them.

Women Workers In Flint

Women in a quarter of Flint's homes worked outside the house, and nearly two-thirds of these women worked in the auto industry—but only in the lowest-paid jobs: as machine operators in AC Spark Plug, upholstery stitchers in Fisher Body, and as clerical workers in GM's offices. While women were paid as little as 25¢ an hour in these "women's departments," wages in all male production departments averaged between 60¢ and 75¢ an hour. However, since automobile industry employment was so seasonal, few workers, male or female, could make ends meet.

Outside of auto, only a few businesses in Flint would hire women: department stores, bakeries, restaurants, laundries, and private homes. However low and seasonal the pay in the auto industry was, it was considerably better than the 20¢ an hour or less that women earned in these other jobs where working conditions were poor and the hours long—up to 60 hours a week in most restaurants, and nearly that in many stores.

With no prospect of promotion or apprenticeship training opportunities, women in Flint, as in other parts of the United States, remained concentrated on the lowest-paid rung of the occupational ladder, working for the nickels and dimes they could get to keep their families going.

"My father wasn't working; he was a carpenter, and it was winter . . . and it was depression time. So my sister and I were supporting the family of seven."

Conditions had always been hard for Flint's autoworkers, even in the "boom" years of the 1920s. At work, their lives were dominated by the relentless, back-breaking grind of machine-paced labor—a world of ear-shattering noises, pounding presses, and billowing welding gas. At home, their lives were dominated by the relentless grind of poverty—a world filled with insecurity and dread of what the future might bring.

Auto production had always been a "seasonal" industry, where peaks of frenzied production alternated with valleys of mass unemployment. But the market crash of 1929 had brought the entire U.S. economy to a halt.

Huge factories that had previously churned out a continuous and growing line of commodities now stood half-empty—underpaid working people simply couldn't afford to buy the tidal wave of goods that were produced, and the economy choked on the backwash of unsold merchandise. Sales of expensive goods, such as cars, fell off dramatically, and as profits plummeted between 1929 and 1932, GM laid off 40,000 of its Flint workers, leaving only 17,000 in its remaining plants.

"Sometimes we'd go to work and work two hours, and then maybe be sent home," Nellie recalls. "No sick benefits; there was no health and welfare programs. There was no social security; there was no unemployment insurance, or anything like that." Without a union, there was also no "seniority list" to govern layoffs and rehiring, and there was therefore no guarantee the company wouldn't suddenly decide you were "too old" to rehire, "too slow," "too Polish," "too black," or too pro-union.

As impoverished families struggled to preserve their dignity and keep off the bread lines, more women searched for work, not always with the full support of their husbands. "My husband said, 'Now, if they want to offer you a job on one of those big machines, don't take it.' I didn't answer because I knew I was going to take anything I could get because, back then, he didn't have a job, and you know—either work or starve."

Deliah found some employers eager to hire her, but for the wrong reasons. "They hired all women down there. They laid off the men, and hired the women, 'cause they thought they didn't have no more sense than to work for nothing."

Those women and men lucky enough to find a job were subjected to continual speed-up and petty coercion by employers anxious to rebuild their profit margins. "You didn't look up," says Helen. "Didn't dare look up. And if you had to take a break, why they had the matron timing you when you went into the restroom. We ran in there and ran out. The more you produced, why the more likely you were to keep your job."

To work under these conditions, GM paid its hourly workers an average of $1,200 to $1,300 a year—and kept an average profit of $1,200 per worker. As the UAW had pointed out in early 1937, with gross profits of $283 million, General Motors could have paid each worker an additional $500 a year and still maintained a yearly profit of $150 million.

As Nellie recalls, speed-ups and wages weren't the only problems autoworkers faced. "There was no safety equipment of any kind. On the press I was on, the day girl lost two fingers. They told everyone, 'don't tell Nellie,' but about 15 told me before I got through the gates. When I went in, there were the fingers still laying on the press."

And for many women who worked outside the home, there was the added insult of what has become known today as sexual harassment. At AC Spark Plug, where Nellie worked, "the foremen were using the girls and holdin' it over their heads that if they didn't do what they wanted them to, they wouldn't have a job . . . If you let a boss pat you anywhere he felt like patting you, or if you would go out with him . . ., you was pretty well assured of a job. But then if he got mad at you . . . he could let you go just as easy as the one that wouldn't."

Women who worked solely in the home faced another burden. "The man was so driven by the speed-up inside the factory," as Genora puts it,

"that he came home unable to be a decent companion to either his wife or children. And she had to take an awful lot of bad treatment from her husband . . . When a person is driven beyond human endurance, you become just so resentful inside yourself, it's got to spill out somewhere."

Flint, like any other community, developed its many refugees from these daily pressures. "Very often, the men would go to beer gardens, to release all of the tensions and threats they had received inside the factory . . . And of course the churches played the role of consoling the wives and promising them . . . that someday in heaven they would be rewarded for their patience and their virtue.

"And that's all we had in Flint: churches and bars."

"He had not been able to accrue seniority because he was a young black worker, and he had been last hired and first laid off."

As with the rest of the nation, the auto industry was highly segregated by race. Most employers refused to hire black workers at all levels of production. Nationwide, black people made up only 4% of the auto workforce in the 1930s. The overwhelming majority of these auto workers were concentrated in three jobs white workers often tried to avoid: as low-wage janitors, foundry workers, and paint sprayers—some of the hottest and dirtiest jobs in the industry.

"My husband worked in Chrysler's paint shop," recalls Lillian, "and quite often I'd have to rub his back down with soda because it had peeled from the heat. The bodies had to go through an oven, and he sometimes had to push them through there. And his back would just cook."

Henry Ford was known for offering greater job opportunities to black workers than his auto industry competitors. The Ford Motor Company opened jobs in some areas of skilled trades and assembly departments to the urban black community. Yet Ford clearly articulated dubious and even racist motives behind these job offers.

"Dominance is an obligation," Ford editorialized in his own newspaper, and "the white man's civilization . . . is the black man's best security."

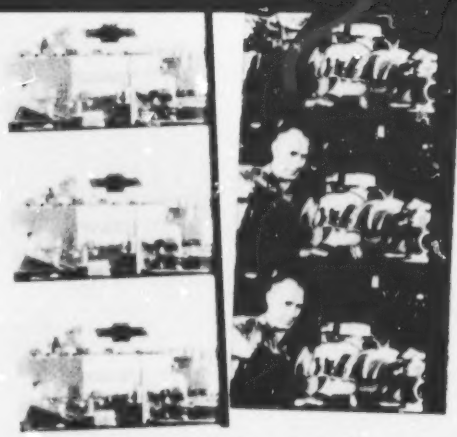
On the other hand, General Motors employed an even smaller proportion of black workers than Ford or Chrysler. Flint's Chevrolet and Fisher Body plant assembly employees were virtually all white. Only the Buick Foundry employed black men in any significant number. Black women had an even harder time finding work in GM's plants. Instead, most black women in Flint were forced to settle for low-wage jobs as domestic servants or laundry workers. Thus, black working women and men were to play their most significant role in industrial labor and community organizing in the Detroit area, rather than in Flint.

Why A Sitdown?

The Fisher Body workers who occupied GM's Flint plants didn't need to debate tactics any further—by the winter of 1936, all agreed a sitdown strike was the union's only effective weapon.

Six years before, Fisher workers had struck GM's Flint operations in a simple conventional "walkout" to protest wage cuts, and the results had been disastrous. Mounted police attacked the exposed picket lines, clubbing and dispersing defenseless picketers. Strike leaders were arrested, membership records seized, and union meetings banned within Flint's city limits. Elsewhere in the U.S., strikes were broken with equal or greater violence—between 1933 and 1936 alone, over 100 strikers were killed by police or company guards.

Thus, the tactic of a factory occupation or "sitdown" strike, used successfully by French and a few American workers in 1936, made perfect sense to Flint's autoworkers, especially in mid-winter when outside picketing was most difficult. Occupying the company's property, in this case, effectively turned the tables: now the Flint police trudged through the snow, while workers stayed inside the barricaded plants—guaranteeing the company couldn't bring in strikebreakers. Strikers were better protected from attack, and could ignore injunctions handed down by anti-union judges. The company, in turn, would be reluctant to attack and possibly damage its own buildings and machinery. Group solidarity among sitdowners was easier to maintain, and this high morale gave the union better staying power in what would turn out to be a long strike.



The sitdown was illegal. Yet outside picketing, according to Michigan law, was illegal also. The legal issues would be debated later (see Chapter 3); but in the meantime, union supporters celebrated their new tactics in song:

"Sitdown, just take a seat,
Sitdown, just rest your feet,
Sitdown, you've got 'em beat,
Sitdown, Sitdown."

"The organization of the U.A.W. was merely a struggle for survival."

When the Great Depression swept across the United States in 1929, many judges and lawmakers still regarded trade unions as a "criminal conspiracy" against property owners. The courts supported these anti-union sentiments by breaking nearly 1,600 strikes with court injunctions during the 1920s. Michigan's Supreme Court condemned all union picketing as illegal in 1922—a decision still on the books in 1937.

But the Depression caused many voters to consider further changes. In 1932 they began by sweeping the conservative President Hoover out of office. Franklin Delano Roosevelt ("FDR") won the Presidential election in a landslide, and his Democratic Party administration promptly enacted its "New Deal" program.

Over the next few years New Deal reforms included Social Security, unemployment compensation, minimum wage laws, and public works projects to create jobs. Among the more important pieces of legislation was the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), or "Wagner Act," sometimes called a "Bill of Rights" for workers, since it guaranteed their right to join unions. When it passed in 1935, many predicted the labor movement would rapidly expand its membership, which then made up only 7% of all workers.

However, it was not this simple. Employers mistakenly expected the U.S. Supreme Court to declare the NLRA unconstitutional—and in the meantime, companies simply ignored the law.

General Motors led the way in defying the National Labor Relations Board, the government agency set up to administer the Wagner Act, known as the NLRB. Among its early decisions (all still in effect today), the NLRB ruled that if a union won a "representation election," the employer was then obligated by law to bargain with that union and disband its company-sponsored "Employee Association" as well. The General Motors Company declared it would never give sole bargaining rights to any "outside" union, regardless of what the majority of the GM workers decided.

The NLRB ruled that workers couldn't be fired for signing a union card—yet, as Nellie recalls, "I signed a card and then I got fired. No excuse, no reason, no nothin'."

The National Labor Relations Board also ruled that companies couldn't hire labor spies to harass and intimidate workers—yet GM employed at least 14 different detective agencies to report on its pro-union employees.

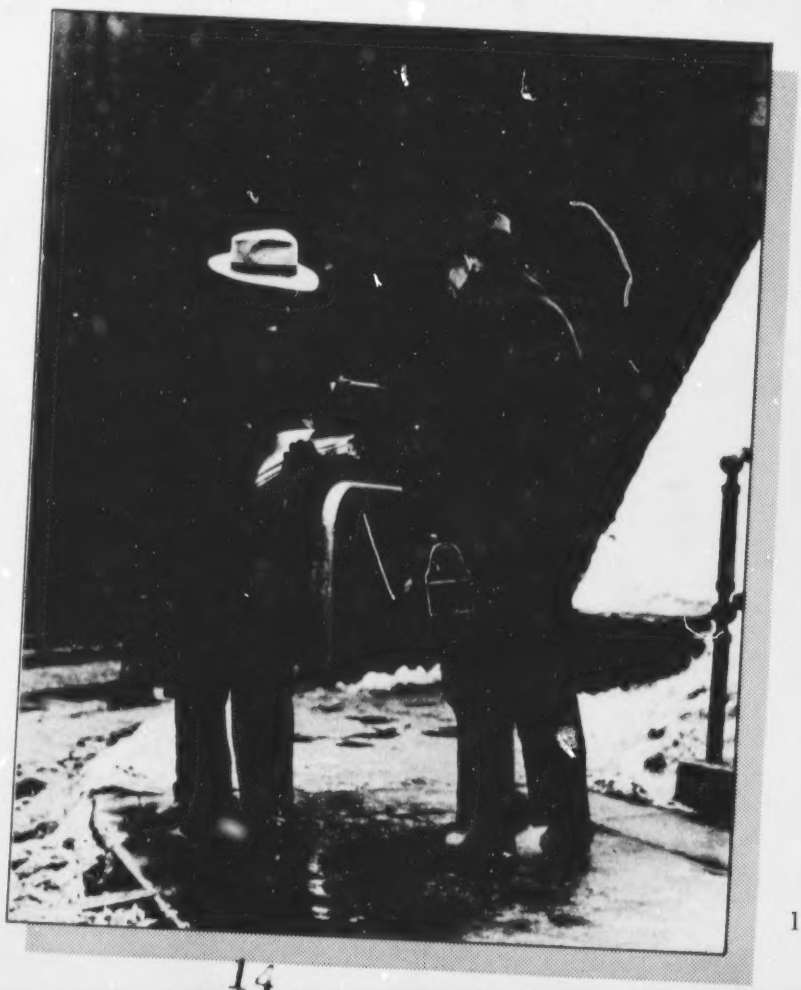
With the Wagner Act challenged in court and ignored in practice, only an organized group of labor unions could force industry to comply with the law. But the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was still ill-equipped to take on such a task.

Founded in 1881, the AFL had grown over the next half century into a federation of some 100 different craft unions, each limited to a particular skilled trade, such as machinists, metal polishers, or electricians. The AFL did not represent unskilled workers and usually restricted its organizing efforts to white male workers. And employers' discriminatory hiring practices barred the access of women, foreign born, and minority workers to the craft unions also.

Thus, the AFL, in effect, upheld industry practices by denying women and minorities any opportunities for apprenticeship training and thus continued to limit their access to many skilled auto industry jobs.

None of the separate craft unions alone could win recognition from the powerful auto companies. And the companies, in order to increase profits and productivity, were automating production. And the effect of automation was to divide up most of the skilled crafts into unskilled or semi-skilled jobs.

The task of organizing the majority of industrial autoworkers as a force therefore fell to a few inde-



pendent unions outside the AFL. These maverick organizations tried to unify all workers—skilled and unskilled, black and white, male and female—into broad "industrial" unions that could match the power of giant corporations like GM. But without the support of the established labor movement, their efforts were usually crushed by the auto industry's army of strikebreakers and spies.

In 1935, a handful of AFL unions formed the "Committee for Industrial Organization." Their efforts to change Federation policy angered the dominant craft unions, and these young reformers were suspended from the AFL in November 1936. Led by John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers, these outcast unions began their own organizing drives, and later formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations, known as the CIO.

Among the "CIO" unions was the United Auto Workers, formed in 1935 as an experiment in industrial unionism. After the break with the AFL, the U.A.W. accelerated its organizing drive in key auto cities.

"If you went to a person's home, for a union meeting," Nellie remembers, "they'd turn the lights on upstairs, but you'd go down in the basement and talk by candlelight. They were so secretive." (They had to be, to avoid detection by company spies.)

1936 was a presidential election year. Over the summer and fall of 1936 the U.A.W.'s organizing drive in Flint—led by Wyndham Mortimer, Bob Travis, and Roy Reuther—slowly picked up steam. Organizers leafleted workers at factory gates, helped them with transportation to meetings, and visited them in their homes. Union representatives, called "stewards," were elected by union members to give the union a voice on the shop floor, and a newspaper, *The Flint Auto Worker*, edited by Henry Kraus, appeared to counter General Motor's media monopoly.

The patient organizing of the U.A.W. began to inspire a growing confidence among Flint's autoworkers, as did the temporary economic recovery of 1936-1937 that put many autoworkers back on the job. And, FDR was reelected President in November 1936, carrying all but two of 48 states.

In Michigan itself, labor was further strengthened by the election of Frank Murphy as Governor. During the campaign, he declared himself "heart and soul for the labor movement," and pledged he'd never use the power of his office to suppress strikes. "If I worked for a wage," Murphy had announced, "I'd join my union."

Thousands of Flint's auto workers did just that in 1936, encouraged by the presidential election results, and the successful use of a brief "sit-down" strike to win reinstatement for unfairly fired Fisher Body workers. Workers in GM's plants around the country began wearing their union buttons on the job. GM, noting the sudden leap in union support, tried to stem the tide by raising wages 5¢ an hour.

But it was too little, too late, and on November 18, U.A.W. supporters began a strike at GM's Atlanta, Georgia assembly plant. The strike was in protest of the threatened dismissal of three workers for wearing their union buttons. Atlanta's local U.A.W. leaders immediately called for a national strike against GM to win company-wide recognition for the union. While top leaders of the U.A.W. and CIO differed over when to call such a national strike, several U.A.W. locals jumped on the Atlanta bandwagon, closing GM's Kansas City plant and Cleveland Fisher Body by the end of December.

By then, all eyes were on Flint, since no strike against GM could succeed without shutting down the critical body and engine plants in GM's huge Flint complex—the heart of the company's operations. But Flint's U.A.W. leaders delayed strike action until workers were paid their Christmas bonus, and Frank Murphy was nearly installed in the Governor's office.

At 7:00 a.m., December 30, 1936, cries of "Shut Her Down, Shut Her Down" rose throughout the Fisher II plant. Within minutes, a third floor window was flung open. One man yelled down to his friend, "Hurray, She's ours'." Workers sat down, halting plant production and the Great Sitdown had begun. Later that evening, Fisher I workers, prompted by the rumor that machinery (and therefore their jobs) were being transferred out of their plant, stopped the production line and laid down their tools also.

The sitdowners galvanized broad support in Fisher I and Fisher II, where the heavy workload, a younger workforce, and a solid core of organizers had produced a large pro-union group "ready for action." In contrast, workers at Flint's Buick and Chevrolet plants remained on the job. Most of them supported the union, but were reluctant to join the sitdown until the U.A.W. could prove its strength.

The occupation of the two key Fisher plants was enough to hobble GM, since they produced car bodies for both the Buick and Chevrolet divisions. And in the following days and weeks, the strike wave spread to GM plants around the country, eventually closing 20.

Confident it represented the interests of all autoworkers, the U.A.W. announced that the sitdowners would only resume work after GM disbanded its company union and recognized the U.A.W. as the sole bargaining representative for the workers.

"We cannot," answered GM Vice President William Knudsen, "have a bona fide collective bargaining with sitdown strikers in illegal possession of plants." The company, Knudsen added, would never grant the U.A.W. exclusive bargaining rights, since such an arrangement would amount to a "labor dictatorship," leaving the workers without the representation of a company-sponsored union.

The U.A.W. responded that the company "union" represented no one but the company, and that recognition of sole bargaining rights for the U.A.W. was simply the demand for majority rule.

CHAPTER 3

The Women Step Out

"We made up our minds that we were going to be as big a part of it as the men. And we were, believe me."

For many of the women left alone at home to care for their families while their husbands occupied the plant, the whole affair seemed to be at their expense. While the men pursued the strike, life still had to go on outside without them; bills had to be paid, clothes washed, errands run, and children fed.

On New Year's Eve some of the women came down to the plant and yelled up to their husbands, "This is a hell of a place for you to be."

"A couple of very fine union men were really threatened," Genora remembers. They "came down out of that plant, and were booed by their buddies, and that's a very dangerous thing in any strike situation to have a man so booed and cowed by division in his family."

It was clear that the gulf that separated many of the men and women was a threat to the strike's success, that without the support of the women outside the plants, it was unlikely that the union could mobilize the broad-based community support it needed to win.

As May Blake, an early U.A.W. supporter put it: "The men are so busy organizing themselves and their fellow workers that they have forgotten to organize the most important persons, their wives!"

General Motors, however, didn't forget. They sent foremen to visit the homes of striking workers to try and enlist their wives in a back-to-work movement that would pressure the men to give up. And the Flint Alliance for the Security of Our Jobs, Our Homes and Our Community, a vigilante group formed by GM supervisors and headed by former Buick paymaster George Boysen, also visited the wives, threatening them with economic ruin if their husbands remained with the "tiny band of disrupters" who occupied the plants.

On New Year's Day, however, a group of women met in the U.A.W. headquarters at the Pengelly Building to discuss how they, as women, could strengthen the union. These women were already active in the U.A.W.'s strike kitchen and on the picket line.

"But our duty," one of their leaders later recalled, "was to get *all* of the wives interested and active in this crisis." With that goal in mind, and after some discussion about not wanting to be called "Ladies" like the factory manager's wives, the group voted to become the official Women's Auxiliary.

A top priority for the Auxiliary was showing women how the strike was in their interest—that a union would not only improve conditions in the plants, but also in the home by insuring better pay, benefits, and job security. And that in this struggle, "women could play a very, very important role themselves, for their children, not (just) through their husbands, but directly."

The Auxiliary's Publicity Department and Speakers Bureau soon began giving talks in neighborhood meetings and nearby cities. Contact Committees were set up to insure that each "sitdown widow" and strike family had enough food and coal to survive.

To help women participate fully in strike activities and meetings, Auxiliary members like Bessie Garrison and Dorothy Mejia organized a nursery in the Pengelly, freeing mothers with younger children from continual childcare. The previously male-dominated atmosphere of the U.A.W.'s headquarters began to be transformed. "In the Auxiliary room" Mary Heaton Vorse wrote at the time, "there are always some children playing around. A big crowd comes after school to find out what Ma's doing, more come in after the movies, and there's always a baby or two."

Women who were initially unsure about the strike now began dropping in at the Pengelly Building to see if they could help. They soon found themselves immersed in the critical tasks of maintaining and building the strike: speaking in public meetings, organizing dances and raffles to raise money for strike support, soliciting merchants for donated food, or delivering meals to the sitdowners. And as membership grew, hundreds of Auxiliary members also began doing regular picket duty in the sub-freezing temperatures outside the plants.

This concentrated activity had a profound effect on many housewives, for the appearance of a women's strike auxiliary made up of their friends and neighbors effectively countered the media's portrayal of union supporters as "common lawbreakers" and "disrupters." The Auxiliary also gave many housewives their first opportunity to become active outside the home, taking on public roles and responsibilities previously associated with men only.

In a few short weeks, some 500 women had organized themselves into a formidable support group for the union cause, a transformation few would have thought possible when the strike began. The union was strengthened immeasurably as a result, for the Auxiliary unified the women with the men in a single-minded struggle for a better life.

Three days into the strike, on January 2, General Motors obtained an injunction prohibiting the strikers from remaining in the plants "in idleness, in a so-called 'sitdown' strike." In response, the nearly 2,000 men inside the plants prepared for expected eviction by police.

However, the expected police attack never came since it was revealed that Judge Black, the judge who'd ordered the injunction, owned $219,000 worth of General Motors stock—representing, as the U.A.W. put it, a clear conflict of interest and a "cruel blow" to the integrity of the judicial system. This was announced January 5th and the injunction was therefore not enforced.

Instead, life inside the occupied plants settled into a routine. Committees were set up to handle security, defense, food distribution, fire safety, education, sanitation, and even a postal committee to distribute letters between sitdowners and their families. An orchestra was organized at Fisher #1 and this spirited crew of harmonica players and fiddlers gave nightly concerts for the sitdowners and picketers. Strikers occupied their free time with card games, checkers, and even roller skating. Visiting theater groups performed inside the plant, and classes in parliamentary procedures, labor history, and creative writing were held.

"Women of the city of Flint—break through those police lines and come down here and stand with your husbands and your brothers, your sons and your sweethearts."

By January 11, GM's national operations had been nearly paralyzed by striking workers, yet GM refused to even meet with the U.A.W. while sitdowners remained in any of the company's plants. Any such contact, the company feared, would legitimize the strikers' action and strengthen the U.A.W. From the company's point of view, it made more sense to stall.

So at noon on January 11, company guards turned off the heat in Fisher #2, previously kept on at the request of state officials. Soon after, company guards (who still occupied the factory's ground floor) locked the front gates and took down the ladder used to carry food to the sitdowners on the floor above.

"The (union) men," according to organizer Victor Reuther, "notified the plant police that if they didn't open the gates within the count of ten, they'd open them themselves." The company police, seeing that the men were determined, left the gates and locked themselves in the ladies dressing room. The gates were then opened by the strikers, and the evening meal was brought into the plant by supporters. They thought the crisis was over.

But suddenly and without warning, Flint's riot-equipped police drove up to the factory and demanded to be let inside. When the sitdowners refused, the police broke the windows in the building's main door and fired tear gas into the plant. The sitdowners countered with fire hoses and a barrage of automobile door hinges. Momentarily, the police were driven back up Chevrolet Avenue, where they regrouped and charged the plant again—and were again repulsed by the sitdowners and pickets.

As Victor Reuther directed the strikers' defense from the union sound car, a tremendous crowd of Flint spectators gathered at both the north and south ends of Chevrolet Ave., separated from the melee by the police.

Police gunfire wounded thirteen strikers and picketers, and hundreds more were gassed as the police kept up a continual barrage of tear-gas bombs.

Genora Johnson was one of the few women who stayed throughout the battle. "Although several union men urged me to go to a safer place because I was a woman, I wanted to remain," she recalled.

Genora asked to speak from the sound car to the huge crowd now massed near the plant. The batteries on the sound car were running low, and the police looked as if they were preparing to shoot their way into the plant.

"I got up there, and I was desperate, and I said, 'Women of the city of Flint, break through those police lines, and come down here and stand with your husbands and your brothers, your sons and your sweethearts.' And this was electrifying because they thought that there was no women down there until this woman's voice came over the line..."

The tide of the battle quickly shifted in the union's favor as women and men streamed down Chevrolet Avenue to reinforce the strikers. "The women did break through that night, and it was such a great, great thrill. . . . As soon as women started marching down to the center of the battle, the police didn't want to be accused of firing into the backs of unarmed women, God forbid! And that wound up the battle that night."

The "Battle of Bull's Run," as it was called from that night on (Flint's police were often referred to as "bulls"), was a key turning point in the Flint sitdown. The strikers and their supporters, armed only with rocks and door hinges, had routed Flint's heavily armed police, and news of this extraordinary victory strengthened the resolve of every GM striker across the country.

The police attack and subsequent battle also convinced Gov. Frank Murphy that local officials couldn't be counted on to maintain a neutral peace in the city, and he promptly ordered nearly 3,500 Michigan National Guardsmen into Flint to prevent further violence. The Governor also persuaded General Motors to restore the heat and access to food for the sitdowners in Fisher #2.

For the women who'd fought in the Battle of Bull's Run, the victory had a special significance, demonstrating, as Mary Heaton Vorse, a nationally known labor journalist, wrote, "... the new importance it gave to women in the strike." The night of the victory, "we built a big bonfire ... and we marched around and sang songs all the rest of the night. . . . And out of that," says Genora, "was born a solidarity and a feeling that women were as courageous and as capable of giving as men. So it was then that we said, 'why can't women form an organization to deal with these kinds of emergencies when the police attack?' "

The Flint Women's Emergency Brigade

"A new type of woman was born in the strike. . . . Women who only yesterday felt inferior to the task of organizing, speaking, leading, as if overnight, had become the spearhead of the battle."*

*Mary Heaton Vorce
labor journalist, 1937

Fifty volunteers answered Genora's call for a meeting to form the Women's Emergency Brigade. "There were wives, and daughters, and sisters of the sitdowners" in the Brigade, Nellie Besson remembers. "There was also people that worked in the shops, women all the way from 16 to 65."

The Brigade membership soon swelled to more than 400 women, led by Genora Johnson and six lieutenants. Each Brigade lieutenant was in charge of several squads of women. Working women accepted these key leadership roles: Ruth Pitts and Pit Wiseman, from the Cut and Sew Department of Fisher Body; Nellie Besson, fired from AC Spark Plug for signing a union card; Teeter Walker from Redmonds, a small parts plant closed down as a result of the strike; and Teckla Roy and Inez Chapman.

Membership required a commitment to be on call for emergencies 24 hours a day and to pledge never to break ranks, even under police fire.

Each squad had an assigned car and driver. Within a moment's notice, these "troops" could be mobilized and hundreds of women readied for action.

In a number of cases, more than one family member volunteered for Brigade duty. "I am the mother of nine children and the grandmother of three," one of the Brigade's activists, Gladys Lamb, proudly declared at the time, and "my daughter is down at the kitchen, on guard all night. She hasn't been home for three days, but we are going to see that no vigilantes break up our kitchen."

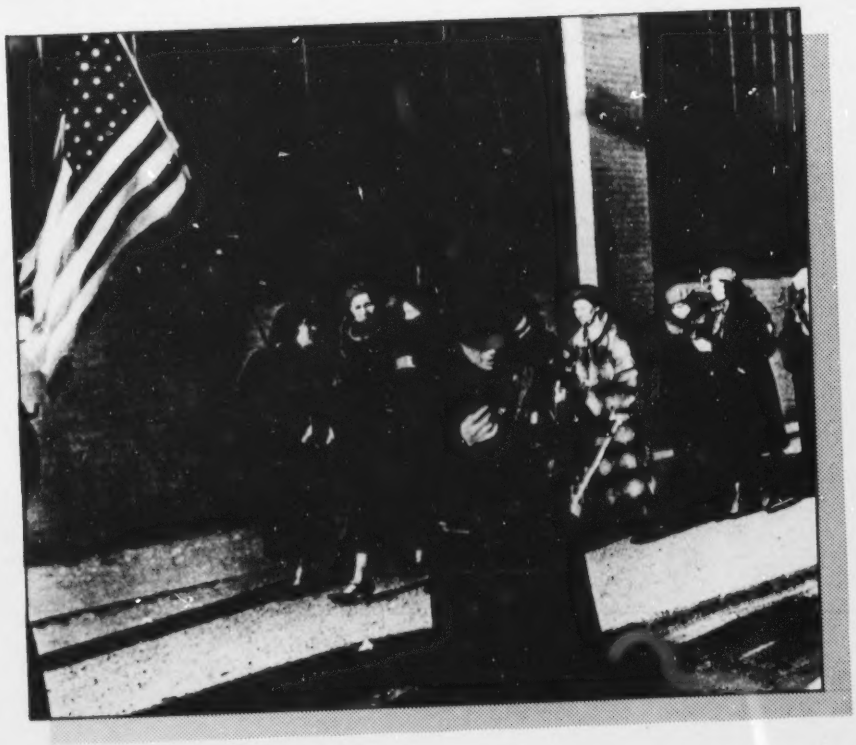
Always visible in their red berets and armbands lettered "EB", the Flint Women's Emergency Brigade sent its members wherever reinforcements were needed on short notice.

Women who'd rarely ventured beyond their own neighborhoods were now travelling up to 100 miles to speak, gain support and organize. "We didn't only fight for Flint," as Mary put it, "we fought anywhere they needed a little support. So they had a Women's Emergency Brigade in Saginaw, they had one in Detroit, they had one in Lansing, they all started their own Brigade." By early February, women in at least six cities had formed Brigades.

The continual organizing, public speaking, picket duty, recruiting, rallies, and other strike-support tasks initiated and carried out by members of the Emergency Brigade brought women into prominent leadership in the strike. Their work created national publicity. "Those who came down and were active," Genora remembers, "saw that they had a new respect from their husbands and other union men. Before, they opened their mouths, what did it matter, it's just a woman talking. But now she was part of the battle. She was a comrade in arms and they listened to her."

The Detroit Women's Emergency Brigade was as active as the Flint Brigade. Detroit was a much larger city, divided into many ethnic neighborhoods. There were Polish, Italian and Southern blacks and whites. Many of these women joined Detroit's Auxilaries and Brigades. Many of these Brigaders had been active in neighborhood and consumer organizing efforts from the 1930s, and they brought a richness of experiences and backgrounds to the Detroit Women's Brigade, to the Auxiliary, and to the picket line "squadrons." During and after the Flint sitdown, thousands of women workers in Detroit auto-parts, cigar, and service industries, also sat down in their workplaces, inspired by the Brigades and the Flint sitdown. (See Chapter 5.)

Many women were transformed by the new experience. "I found a common understanding and unselfishness I'd never known," wrote Violet Baggett, a Detroit Emergency Brigade member. Before, "I didn't



have time for anything outside of my own small circle. (Now) I'm living for the first time with a definite goal. I want a decent living not only for my family, but for everyone. Just being a woman isn't enough anymore. I want to be a human being."

Brigade and Auxiliary members relied on each other for support as they broadened their role in the strike and expanded their roles in the home.

Nearly all the women faced some opposition and hostility from their neighbors, their church, and their families for stepping beyond the boundaries of their traditional roles. As Nellie recalls, "They thought that I was being very out of place when I started going around making speeches. They didn't think a woman had a right to be there doing things like that."

For the sitdowners, however, the crucial role played by women in the strike was a sorely needed boost, prompting them to telegram their "deep gratitude and unending praise" for the women. As Mary Heaton Vorse then described it, "Whenever the Brigade appeared in formation at the plant gates, the strikers would gather at the windows to cheer and applaud them."

"We never thought General Motors would ever give in; a big company like that and just us little no-bodies . . ."

Following the Battle of Bull's Run, a renewed series of negotiations indicated a possible end to the strike. But the negotiations failed, and over the ensuing weeks, the strike took a mounting toll from both sides.

General Motors was losing large (but undisclosed) amounts of money. But GM, unlike smaller auto companies, had turned a profit *throughout* the depression, while thousands of other corporations went bankrupt. So the company executives still believed they could outlast the impoverished workers and their families.

Many strikers had now gone without a paycheck for four weeks, and in the 1930s, no one had a savings account to fall back on, or union strike benefits to keep food on the table.

Believing it could finally overwhelm the weakened and apparently demoralized strikers, GM applied, on January 28, for another court injunction to clear the sitdowners out of Fisher 1 and 2. Violence against U.A.W supporters had meanwhile increased, especially in strike centers outside of Flint, like Anderson, Indiana and Saginaw, Michigan, where in late January thugs attacked U.A.W organizers and injured them. On another occasion, Women's Emergency Brigade members, returning from an out of town speaking engagement, were run off the road by vigilantes. Even though foremen and supervisors from GM's plants were conspicuous leaders in the mob, none were arrested.

The strike had reached a crisis point for the U.A.W. With the company increasingly wearing down and

intimidating the strikers, the union needed a dramatic event to avoid defeat. "If we stand still," as one U.A.W. leader put it, "we're through."

In a series of secret meetings, the local U.A.W.'s top leaders devised a plan for enlarging the strike and putting the U.A.W. back on the offensive. If the union could tie up Chevrolet Plant 4 with a sitdown strike, GM's remaining production would be paralyzed. The Chevy 4 plant made the engines for low-priced Chevrolets assembled throughout the country. Seizure of this key plant would close GM's largest division (already hobbled by strikes in its body and assembly plants), and serve notice on the company that it could not outlast the union.

The problem was that immediately next to Plant 4 was the headquarters for GM's plant police, and the sprawling engine plant was too large for the sitdowners to effectively hold against immediate counterattack by nearby guards. The union needed a diversion that would draw the plant police away.

"Now, all the way over on the outer side of the (Chevrolet) complex," Genora remembers, "was Plant 9, and this produced bearings. We let it be leaked out that Plant 9 was the target plant, and a stool pigeon went and told the corporation." The company swallowed the bait and mobilized 200 of its plant police to protect Plant 9.

The diversionary sitdown at Plant 9 began during the afternoon shift change on February 1, the day of the injunction hearing. Immediately, GM's reinforced plant guards counter-attacked, using clubs and tear-gas to drive the U.A.W.'s supporters towards the rear of the building. During the fighting, union supporters and Emergency Brigade members, two by two, marched defiantly around the factory, with the women "all on one side of the street, police down the middle, the men on the opposite side of the street, (and) the police with their guns aimed at the men."

"All at once," Nellie remembers, "Tom Klasey broke out a plant window and there was blood all over. He hollered, 'They're gassing us!' And about that time the women went into action."

Rushing to the Factory's street-side wall, Brigade members, clubs in hand, began breaking Plant 9's windows, hoping to ventilate the building and clear it of gas. "Our men were in there," as Mary put it, "and we didn't want them tear gassed."

Sheriff's deputies and city police quickly moved in to drive the women away from the plant's shattered windows, and it soon became evident that the sitdowners couldn't hold Plant 9. After 40 minutes of unequal combat, plant police finally arrived to carry away the injured sitdowners, and the U.A.W.'s dejected supporters trudged back to the Pengelly Building, convinced they'd lost the strike's final battle.

Genora then took her five Brigade Lieutenants aside, "And I told them, 'For God's sake, the real action is in Plant 4.' We sent one of the Lieutenants to the telephone. 'Call the Pengelly Building at once.'"

With GM's plant police tied down in Plant 9, 100 union supporters—on strike from Chevrolet Plant 6, burst into Plant 4 and reinforced some 200 Chevrolet workers in an hour-long battle with the plant's depleted guard force. Unionists marched up and down the aisles, turning off machinery and forcing supervisory personnel out of the plant. Company reinforcements immediately counterattacked—and were driven off.

As the battle raged inside Plant 4, the five Brigade Lieutenants arrived at the plant gates, which had been left unprotected up to that point. Immediately, Genora recalls, "some of the union men looked out and said 'Guard that gate! Let no one through there! So by the time we were down there in front, we saw the

city police coming. The whole squad of them . . . And we just stood there and they said, 'Out of our way, we're going in.' And we said, 'Over our dead bodies you're going in.'"

The women gripped each other's wrists and formed a human chain across the gate. "'What if you had a brother in there,'" Nellie remembers telling the police, "'wouldn't you try to protect them?' . . . We kept talking back and forth until we stalled for time. Then all at once we heard, 'Solidarity,' and we looked up and here comes all these women and men down the street singing at the top of their voices."

The outnumbered police promptly broke off their effort to enter Plant 4, and stood by, dazed as union supporters followed the Emergency Brigade's lead in setting up a picket line before the building.

"We were thrilled," Genora remembers. "We just felt like we had saved the situation."

By early evening, Plant 4 was secure, and elated men and women surveyed their victory with pride. "We have the key GM plant, and the eyes of the world are looking at us," one Plant 4 sitdowner wrote his wife. "We sure done a thing that GM said never could be done."

"They stayed put until General Motors agreed to bargain with the U.A.W."

Even as strikers and Brigade members battled the company for control of Chevrolet 9 and 4, Judge Paul Gadola gavelled open the scheduled hearing on GM's injunction request.

The U.A.W. lawyers argued that GM wasn't entitled to legal protection since it had openly defied federal labor law, and that the sitdowners were simply demanding their rights under the Wagner Act. Gadola rejected the union argument, and declared that the sitdowners had violated GM's "right to hold property." He gave them until 3 p.m., February 3, to cease *all* picketing and evacuate the plants—otherwise the U.A.W. would be fined $15 million.

With the union now finally back on the offensive, however, strikers were in no mood to honor the injunction. The U.A.W. designated February 3 as "Women's Day" in honor of the Women's Emergency Brigades and Auxiliaries, and invited autoworkers and trade unionists from all over the midwest to converge on Flint for the "celebration."

On this day, over 500 women marched "with babies and banners" through downtown Flint on their way to the rally in front of Fisher 1. The women—wearing red, orange, or green berets representing local Brigades and Auxiliaries from Saginaw, Michigan, to Toledo, Ohio—sang union songs as they marched, urging the thousands of spectators to join them. Eleanor Gustafson described the march in the U.A.W. newspaper: "What a huge shivery thrill it was—seeing thousands of Flint residents lined up on the sidewalks . . . With singing and shouting—with banners waving."

By the time the injunction deadline went into effect at 3 p.m., there were over 10,000 women and men massed in front of Fisher 1, for the moment peaceful but conspiciously prepared to defend the plant against all odds. "I thought," Eleanor wrote, "Let General Motors come out to Fisher! and look at this picket line—and deny the strength and numbers of the union."

The injunction clearly couldn't be enforced without extensive plant damage and loss of life. With national operations at a standstill (GM had assembled only 150 cars in the first 10 days of February), and with the company under mounting pressure from President Roosevelt, GM agreed on February 11, 1937, to recognize and bargain with the U.A.W. Significantly, GM also agreed not to "sponsor, aid, or abet" any company unions in the 17 plants where the U.A.W. was clearly dominant. The victory was won.

As the strikers marched out of Fisher 1 and 2 that evening, celebrations broke out in front of the plants and at the U.A.W. headquarters. Singing strikers and supporters marched through the streets, stopping briefly at the banks of the Flint river to drop an effigy of George Boysen, leader of the Flint Alliance, into the water.

Upwards of 5,000 people gathered at the Pengelly, remaining much of the night. "These people," Rose Pesotta, an organizer of garment workers, said, "sang and joked and laughed and cried, deliriously joyful. . . . Victory . . . meant a freedom they had never known before. No longer would they be afraid to join unions."

2.

CHAPTER 4

Just the Begining

"This one strike really started everything and proved that it could be done."

The United Auto Worker's Flint victory made "Solidarity" a popular tune in 1937, as a wave of sitdown strikes swept the country following the February 11 settlement.

As one of the last truckloads of National Guard troops pulled out of Flint following the strike settlement, the citizen-soldiers sang the song they'd heard many times during the previous month:

"When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run,
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun,
For the union makes us strong.
Solidarity Forever!"

There were 80 sitdown strikes lasting one day or longer in the textile industry alone. There were at least 500 sitdowns in all industries combined by the end of the year—black and white laundry workers in Chicago, Mexican-American pecan shellers in San Antonio, and black tobacco workers in Winston-Salem, to name a few.

In Detroit, upwards of 35,000 workers occupied 100 workplaces during February and March—some for only three hours and others for as long as six weeks.

"The phone would ring," Myra Wolfgang, a Detroit organizer, recalls, "and the voice at the other end would say, 'I'm Mary Jones, a soda clerk at Liggett's; we've thrown the manager out and we've got the keys. What do we do now?'"

Detroit's women were the backbone of many of these sitdown strikes. Beginning in late February, nearly 2,000 women cigar workers barricaded themselves inside Detroit's six largest cigar factories, demanding union recognition and wage increases from their average of only $12 a week. They were followed by women sitdowners in dozens of companies and industries: sales clerks at Woolworths, waitresses at Stouffers, maids and elevator operators at the Statler Hotel, clerical workers in federal welfare offices, women machine operators in auto-parts plants, even the young women and girls selling candy in downtown movie theaters—all joined the sitdown wave.

During this sitdown era, Emergency Brigade and Auxiliary women in Detroit and elsewhere broadened their organizing to respond to the consumer and community problems as well. For instance, land owners raised rents 15-50% in Flint, taking quick advantage of the higher wages the sitdowners had won. Wrote Jean Stevenson in a U.A.W. leaflet, "Are we going to hand over the monetary gains of our hard-won battle to these real-estate sharks? Surely not," she answered, and "the same applies to food and clothing."

Rallies were organized in Flint, Detroit, Muskegon, and other cities, with Auxiliary members picketing both local stores and large meat-packing plants for lower prices. When meat prices didn't come down, the Auxiliary declared a "No Meat Week."

Auxiliaries also participated in post-1937 organizing drives, particularly the Auxiliary organized on Detroit's west side by Rose Billups, Nancy Tappes, Anita Gallo and Bertha Clough. Made up of black and white women whose husbands worked at Ford, the Auxiliary canvassed black communities nearest Ford's huge Dearborn complex, building support for the successful organizing strike of April, 1941.

"Union labor standards," wrote Fania Fish Reuther in the April 1937 edition of *Auto Women Advance*, "can only be maintained when women receive the same pay as men for equal work." But this was not to be an easily realized goal.

The drive to organize women workers and continue the activities of the Emergency Brigades faltered after 1937. The emergency atmosphere had subsided when unions won recognition in dozens of industries, and to many, it no longer seemed necessary to keep the Brigades alive. Money and support were no longer available, and Brigade members were encouraged to continue their activities only within their local union or "Ladies" Auxiliary.

Without the unions', their families' and society's full support to continue, many women found a job and union membership difficult to manage. Daycare wasn't available, stores closed before working mothers could reach them, and most jobs open to women still paid poorly. The traditional belief that women should therefore only be fulltime homemakers and mothers slowly reasserted itself, and many women and men looked forward to the end of the "emergency," when women could once again return to home-centered roles.

Fania Reuther's call for equal pay for work of equal value would eventually be taken up by women in earnest, but not for another 30 years.

"Well golly, we gained a lot. We had better working conditions and the foreman wasn't breathing down your neck all the time."

Union membership quadrupled between 1937 and 1953, climbing to 17 million organized workers—one of every three men in the labor force, and one of every seven women.

The shape of industrial society was correspondingly transformed. Collective bargaining mostly replaced the virtual class warfare of the depression years. For many industries, this new era was inaugurated when the United Auto Workers signed its first contract with General Motors on March 12, 1937.

The contract's key feature was a grievance procedure that served to govern shop-floor relations. Management still made the major production decisions, but union members could now protest the supervisor's disciplinary actions or challenge the company's production standards, and management was then obliged to talk. If the two sides couldn't agree, the dispute might be settled by either outside arbitration or—if union members needed more militant action—by strike.

Over the ensuing years, unions won additional improvements in working conditions and pay, including (depending on the industry) such gains as seniority rights to prevent arbitrary lay-off or discrimination in promotion; company-paid health insurance; pensions; paid vacations; supplemental unemployment benefits; and cost-of-living increases.

Wages rose dramatically too. By the 1960s, union workers, on the average, made nearly one-third more than non-union workers in the same kinds of jobs. And the effect was felt beyond the unionized plants. Many times just the presence of unions in communities often raised wages in the surrounding geographical area.

None of this came easily. Employers weren't eager to share even a fraction of the absolute power they'd wielded before 1937, and most workplace improvements were only won after bitter struggles, including a huge strike-wave in 1946 that involved 4.5 million workers.

But the nature of industrial conflict changed as unions themselves became part of a new status quo. There were fewer police attacks on strikers. Management techniques became more sophisticated. It was clearer and clearer that strikes could be costly to companies, and many corporations found they could more profitably meet wage demands—and then often turn around and use them to "justify" even larger price hikes.

Collective bargaining also became increasingly complex, as companies used specialists and lawyers to represent them, and unions followed suit. One-page contracts slowly grew into small books crammed with legalisms. Grievances filed against the company took months, even years, to resolve if management chose to stall.

All this made the union's role seem less meaningful, especially to younger people who hadn't lived through the upheaval and strikes of the 1930s. For many, improved conditions and better pay seemed to come automatically from the company and the union's role as catalyst because less visible.

Most unions, including the U.A.W., successfully resisted the growth in organized crime that plagued American society and business after World War II. They continued to advocate for better wages, retirement benefits, and health insurance for the family—the things that can enable workers to buy homes and save for their children's education. As profits and wages soared in the boom years of the 1950's and 1960's, many workers, both those active in unions and those not, began regarding prosperity and growth as permanent fixtures. With the economic pie seeming to be continually growing, social activism just didn't seem as necessary.

"He had not been able to accrue seniority because he was a young black worker, and he had been last hired and first laid off."

For black Americans, the post-war prosperity celebrated in the press was a cruel joke. A black worker's income averaged less than 50¢ for each dollar a white worker received. Despite the war-time rhetoric of "making the world safe for democracy," black veterans returning from segregated army units found the old "Jim Crow" system of racial discrimination unchanged.

Black working people were still denied better-paid jobs, forced to use segregated washrooms, forced to sit in the back of the bus or in the balcony of the movie theater—and not allowed at all in many restaurants. The better schools, housing, public facilities—even major league sports—were all reserved for "whites only."

The CIO was one of the few organizations which had, from its founding, endorsed black civil rights. In contrast to the AFL, the CIO's constitution officially welcomed all "working men and women regardless of race, creed, color, or nationality," and the U.A.W. in particular worked closely with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to desegregate war-time jobs and public housing.

But efforts to desegregate American society slowed in the "Cold War" years immediately following World War II. Politicians like Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon began a witch hunt for "subversives" in groups like the CIO and NAACP, branding all dissent as Un-American, and forcing thousands of people from their jobs on unsubstantiated charges of being "security risks" or "Agents of Moscow."

In this hostile atmosphere, the united militancy of the 1930s took a back seat to bitter strife within many unions. Congress, encouraged by business interests, took advantage of the conflict by passing the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, which placed crippling restrictions on the political and trade union rights of organized labor. Torn by bitter internal turmoil,

the CIO expelled ten unions for refusing to accept the Taft-Hartley "anti-communist" oath.

In 1955 the CIO and the AFL finally merged, with the AFL finally accepting industrial unionism. This was also a time when many conservative and right-wing politicians hoped there might be an end to the social activism that had fostered change for 20 years.

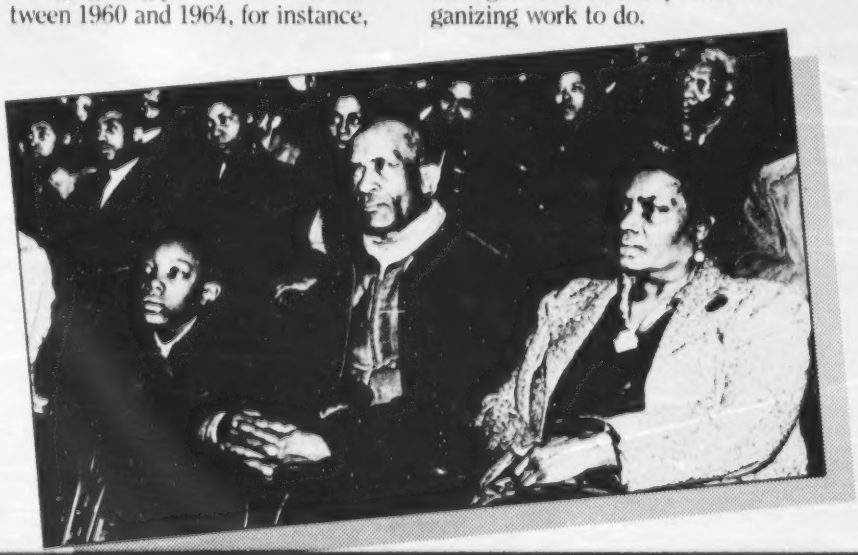
They were wrong. Millions of black Americans were tired of forever waiting to be "granted" their rights. They began instead to militantly assert them, beginning as a mass movement that same year in 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to move from a "whites only" seat in the front of a Montgomery, Alabama, bus. Her arrest, precipitated a long series of sit-ins, sitdowns, wade-ins, kneel-ins, and stand-ins that eventually forced the country to pass laws desegregating public facilities. Between 1960 and 1964, for instance, almost 20,000 black civil rights demonstrators and white supporters were arrested, challenging discriminatory laws.

Many of the goals of the civil rights movement, however, remain to be won—average black family income rose to 61% of white income by 1970, but has since fallen even more as inflation and high unemployment have hit minority workers hard.

During the 60s and 70s many trade unionists have continued to connect labor struggles to social conditions, providing critical support to civil rights marches, condemning the war in Viet Nam, endorsing the ERA, and pushing aggressively to clean up the plant health and safety hazards threatening their lives and livelihood.

Conditions are again worsening for the labor movement as a whole as labor's share of the economic pie is rapidly eaten away by double-digit inflation and permanently high levels of unemployment. Unions are again under mounting attack by the Right Wing. They are blamed by the media and big business for making too many demands for a healthy and safe workplace, a living wage commensurate with inflation, and an end to harassment and discriminatory practices.

With companies now closing many U.S. plants and relocating in other parts of the world where there are "union-free" environments, many working people have rediscovered the lesson learned 45 years ago in Flint: "If we stand still, we're through." There's always more organizing work to do.



CHAPTER 5

Women Working Today

"For years, they told me I was doing 'women's' work. But I knew all along I was doing a job same as men—but not getting paid the same."

Dorothy Thompson, a 58-year-old grandmother who works in the Government Printing Office, is reminiscing—not about the 1930s, but the present. A book binder for 33 years, she recently spearheaded a successful court suit to bring the wages of her 300 female co-workers into line with their male counterparts—who made $4 an hour more, operating virtually the same machinery as the women.

Dorothy's complaint certainly isn't new. Neither is it isolated: some 40 years after the rise of the CIO, most of the 41 million working women in the U.S. (triple the number in 1940) are still subject to the same harassment, discrimination, and low pay that plagued 1930s women.

The numbers are staggering. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, full-time working women in major U.S. cities are paid at least $5,000 a year less than men. And the gap is actually growing: in 1956, women workers averaged 65¢ for each dollar men earned—by 1981 women's wages had dropped to 59¢ for every man's dollar earned.

Yet despite these low wages, women continue to enter the paid workforce in growing numbers. "Inflation is driving more and more women into the plants," explains Dolores Dunlap, a stock clerk at Chrysler. "When I started at Chrysler Tank in 1973, there were only about two dozen women; in 1979, there are more than 200 of us. Families just can't survive today unless two people are pulling in wages."

The figures bear Dolores out. In 1947, only one in three adult women worked outside the home. Today, over half do. For the first time in history, working wives outnumber housewives. However, these women workers, who have mostly been forced into the workforce just to maintain family living standards in an unstable economy, are still saddled with the burden of housework and childcare. In the absence of high quality, inexpensive day care especially, this dual burden in difficult to bear.

And unlike Dolores, most women are not even entering union jobs, with good wages, long-established work rules and benefits. Just the opposite. They are mostly entering the same low-wage "job ghettoes" reserved for women in the 1930s, principally in the clerical and service industries. Women find employers eager to hire them in these fast-growing sectors of the economy—but unwilling, no matter what the industry, to change the discriminatory rules and practices that abuse women workers.

"The company views pregnancies as a personal insult," says Lavernia Clark, a sweeper and parts assembler in Lima, Ohio. "One pregnant woman who was getting sick a lot (because of her pregnancy) still couldn't get sick leave, so she spent half the day in the bathroom. She missed so much work the company threatened to fire her."

Only a handful of companies provide paid pregnancy leave for women—expectant mothers are usually compelled to walk away from their jobs, with no guarantee they can return and no money to tide them over during their pregnancy. And once the child is born, an equally troublesome problem arises: the lack of decent daycare facilities.

Joan Glasford, a bank clerk and mother living in New York City, is typical of the six million working mothers in the U.S. with children under six. Without available publicly or privately provided daycare, she relies on her mother to care for her young boy. But Joan is pregnant again, and the grandmother may soon move to Florida for her health.

If the lack of pregnancy leave and daycare facilities doesn't destroy Joan's chances of moving into a higher-paying job, outright employer hostility may. Women are routinely discouraged from entering non-traditional jobs, and denied the training and support that would qualify them for promotion. More often, management will hire men from outside the company rather than upgrade experienced women employees.

"I put in for a transfer," recalls Janice Smith, a bank clerk with a college degree, "figuring I'd go to another department if I couldn't go up. Then a guy was hired on the teller line. He was my age, he had a two-year college degree, and he had less experience than me. But *he* eventually became the assistant to the operations supervisor—*we* weren't even told the position was open!"

There is also the problem of sexual harassment. "At the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas," explains Kenneth Blaylock, president of the American Federation of Government Employees, "it was common knowledge that there were two kinds of evaluations for women: one for good work, and one for 'entertainment.' Supervisors told women that in order for them to be promoted to a GS-6 level, it would be necessary to 'entertain' out-of-towners."

This, though, is hardly an isolated case. A recent survey of female employees found that over 40% had been sexually harassed on the job.

Donna, a sales correspondent at a container company, who quit her job after nine months of persistent harassment from her sales manager says, "... He would wait until I would be on the phone with a customer, and he would walk up ... and look down at (me). I ended up moving my desk to the other side of

the room, and he then would purposely walk over and touch me." Donna first complained to her boss, who just laughed, and then to her general manager, who told her that since she was attractive she should expect that to happen and learn to put up with it. Sexual harassment, however, is against the law and unions and courts can force employers to compensate women workers for damages done and wages lost.

Underpaid, harassed, discriminated against, trapped in low-wage job ghettos—it's little wonder that today's women, the majority of them wage workers, are not willing to accept "business as usual."

"I gave J. P. Stevens 26 years of my life and then, when I needed them, they gave me nothing."

Mildred Whitley works in one of the 85 textile mills owned by J. P. Stevens, the nation's second largest textile manufacturer and one of the many northern-based companies that migrated south to escape unionization. "I had to have a mastectomy and when I asked them for help, a lighter job, my supervisor told me that I could . . . either do the job no matter what it did to me, could quit, or else he would fire me."

Instead, Mildred joined the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) in its effort to organize a union of J. P. Stevens workers.

Like General Motors before it, J. P. Stevens has defied national labor law by systematically intimidating, harassing, and often firing union supporters. And like the women and men of Flint some 45 years ago, a growing number of J. P. Stevens workers have braved tremendous odds in their slow but relentless campaign to win union recognition in this critical southern industry. At this point in time (after a successful national boycott of Steven's products), J. P. Stevens has finally agreed to a settlement with those workers in the ten plants that are already unionized. And organizing efforts are now underway at the remaining un-unionized plants.

Many unions like ACTWU are now commiting themselves to organizing women. They have to now, since many more workers are women. For instance, the number of workers in the unorganized clerical and service jobs went up 44% between 1970 and 1980. These women are fast becoming the biggest pool of non-union workers in the nation.

Many of these working women have again begun to organize on their own behalf. Organizations like the Coalition of Labor Union Women, Nine to Five Association of Working Women, Union WAGE, and the National Commission on Working Women are becoming visible advocates for the rights and issues affecting women workers. And they are growing. Nine to Five began

with a small group of clerical workers in Boston and is now a national organization for office workers with chapters in each state and over 10,000 members.

Union women have also been pushing for expanded organizing efforts among women. "The basic reason we're here," as Addie Wyatt told the founding convention of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, "is a bread and butter issue: we cannot afford the 'luxury' of a discriminatory paycheck."

CLUW activists would be the first to admit that unions, like society, have a long way to go in adjusting to the demands of the women's movement. Problems are frequently rooted right in the workplace. "I've seen it often," says Lavernia Clark, whose plant is a U.A.W. plant. "A woman takes a job that used to be 'man's work,' and there are always a few men who give her trouble. Usually it's the foremen and supervisors, but sometimes it's one or two union brothers.

"But most men live and let live," she adds, "and quite a few are actually helpful." Women in the U.A.W. and other unions are finding growing support among their male co-workers, a change reflected in the nearly 1,200 women elected to top leadership positions in U.A.W. locals alone. "Without the support of a lot of men," Lavernia points out, "I'd never have been elected, I stood up for my rights and the rights of other women, and they respected that."

"The strike has made women more confident now that they are part of the union," says Jim Lowery, local president of the International Woodworkers of America—whose 1,400 members (almost entirely men) in Shelton, Washington struck the Simpson Timber Co. over the sexual harassment and subsequent firing of Toni Gilbertson. Women interviewing for jobs at Simpson were told to take off their blouses, asked if they wore a bra, and whether they would have sex with their supervisor. Backed by the eight-week strike and a court order, Toni is back on the payroll and the company no longer condones this form of sexual harassment.

Organizing the unorganized and winning full equality for working women still won't be easy. Maurine Hedgepeth, a mother of three who began working at J. P. Stevens in 1957, can testify to that. "Stevens doesn't just fire you—they fire your whole family. I testified at a Labor Board hearing in 1964, and a few days later, I went on pregnancy leave. That Christmas they fired my husband, and when my leave was up in January they wouldn't give me my job back. It took me four years to get my job back in the plant, and I had to go all the way up through the courts."

For Maurine and millions of others, it's the same battle the women of Flint, Michigan fought 45 years ago, with the same goals: "We were fighting for dignity," Helen Hauer remembers, "to be treated like human beings. . . ."

The **With Babies and Banners** Illustrated Historical Booklet was developed to accompany the film **With Babies and Banners:** ***Story of the Women's Emergency Brigade.***
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